

Chapter 11

by Peter Blackledge

After our Mother passed away in 1971 and our Father passed away in 1982, I wanted to somehow memorialize the amazing stories and experiences of our wonderful Blackledge family. Our family has historically had a recurrent connection with the number "eleven", even to the passing of our Father who was eleven years older than our Mother and lived eleven years longer than she.

So I developed a list of eleven background stories and eleven legends which I had personally experienced or been told about our family. I then assembled pictures of our family members, sketched out a humorous but relevant way to portray our family in a single group portrait, and tracked down a professional artist to transpose my ideas into a large framed drawing. Here is that professional drawing of "**The Blackledge Hutch**" and my detailed recounting of the eleven Blackledge Family Background Stories and eleven Blackledge Family Legends which are portrayed in it.



ELEVEN Background Stories:

1. We are all dressed in Bunny suits because Mother called us all Bunnies.

2. Patti has a box of running shoes because of her accomplishments as a marathon runner. The box has been marked for "Rabbits" rather than "Men" or "Women".
3. Penn has a tennis racquet because of her accomplishments as a tennis player
4. Dad's bunny suit is monogrammed with "ADB", as he monogrammed many of his shirts with his initials "ADB".
5. Dad is holding a Navy banner, representing his stalwart Navy support.
6. Dad is holding a "Houston Clubber" magazine because he often took us all to the exclusive "Houston Club" for special dinners ----- Note: A side story was Dad's "bromance" with Tony, the Houston Club piano player. Dad would talk expressively about seeing Tony working out at the gym and what a great physique Tony had, so Mike and I couldn't stop kidding Dad about that.
7. Mom has a stack of books in her lap because she loved books and was a voracious reader. She reportedly read all of the Harvard Classics.
8. One book Mother is holding is "How To Speak Bostonian" because of her New England background and accent. We grew up hearing about taking a "baahth".
9. Mom is also holding a book on "Romance Languages" because she loved foreign languages (particularly Romance languages), earning her BA at University of Houston, her MA at Rice University, and then starting her PhD at Rice University (until her first heart attack at age 52) and later teaching French, Spanish, and German at Hartman Junior High and then at Lamar High School (much to my chagrin when I attended Lamar). When Mike and I were growing up, each summer she would ship Mike and me off to Rio Vista Camp in Kerrville, Texas so she could fly to Europe to practice her languages.
10. Another book in Mother's lap is titled "How To Avoid Housework" because she disliked wasting time on housework (Penn said she has inherited that gene), which is the background for the below Legend about our series of household maids.
11. The Monopoly game is in the center, as it was a game which our family (siblings and guests) often gathered around and played together, particularly before evil Television entered our household. (Other games our family played together were Scrabble and Risk).

ELEVEN Blackledge Legends:

1. Mike is holding a glass of milk because in order to get Mike to climb the stairs to his bedroom, a warm glass of this favorite beverage would be placed on the step above him, and moved up each step as Mike would move toward it, calling "Here Mook; Here Mook" .
2. Mike is holding a piece of cheese because he was often called "Michael Mouse." However, at one point, he became "The Mouse Who Roared": Mike had become resentful of his older, domineering sisters ----and finally, having grown big enough to assert his independence, taking one of them and hurling her against the living room sofa. Patti, Penn, and I were all shocked ---- - but his big sisters never bothered him again !!! (Patti and Penn have repressed this shocking event, but Mike and I vividly remember it).
3. Patti is holding her box of running shoes: Patti had qualified to run in the Boston Marathon. At one point during that marathon, she ran past "Love Story" author Eric Segal, who was

sharing a profane conversation while running beside another marathon participant. As Patti ran past Eric Segal, she turned to him and said "You talk just like you write !"

4. I am holding a Police Summons for "Peter Blackledge" charged with "Kicking an officer in the shins." When I was in kindergarten at Roberts Elementary School, a girl in my class was crying because she had unfortunately dropped her toy out of the open classroom window. Our classroom was on the first floor, so I decided to be a gentleman and help her by retrieving her toy. So I climbed up and out the open window and jumped down to the soft dirt below, retrieved her toy, and then walked triumphantly back in through the school's front door for my reward (this is one example of why Garrett Paiz reminds me so much of myself!). When I got back in the classroom, I was chagrined to find that the little girl whom I was rescuing had ratted me out to the kindergarten teacher!. So much for gallantry being rewarded!!! Somehow, the story was embellished (probably by Dad, because he would laughingly tell it over and over during the years to follow) to add my having also kicked a cop in the shins when he had come to get me. I don't recall that part of my adventure, but Dad certainly loved telling everyone about it.

5. Penn is hiding a handful of yellow-colored Monopoly money (which we called "cheeses", as they were yellow and were the largest denomination in Monopoly money) behind her back.

During one of our highly competitive Monopoly games, there came a point where Penny landed on the high-cost property of another player, and became very outwardly distraught at the prospect of being ousted from play due to her going bankrupt as a result. Penn very dramatically and sorrowfully showed us all her modest remaining Monopoly money, and begged for giving her a major break ----- which we, feeling very sorry for her, uncharacteristically did.

Whereupon she subsequently pulled out a large collection of "Cheeses" which she had sneakily hidden away, bought the remaining high-priced Monopoly property, and mercilessly crushed the rest of us players to win the game. (Note: Penn has subsequently become a Christian, so does not like to be reminded of this event from her sordid past. But perhaps it was foretelling her becoming a "Trumpian"?)

6. Penn is holding her tennis racquet in her left hand. At one point in her California life, Penn started playing competitive tennis. She became very good, beating people of greater and greater skill levels, which required her to advance to higher levels of play competition. Finally, she reached such a high level that the other competitors were so good that Penn could no longer win as she had been. So, to be able to continue winning, she came up with a great solution ---- she switched to playing tennis left-handed, which allowed her to start over at the lower skill levels so she could go back to always winning. We Blackledges are not only very competitive, we are also very innovative!!!

7. A classic Thanksgiving legend, retold over and over across the years, was when Dad dropped the carefully prepared Thanksgiving turkey onto the dining room floor. (However, I don't recall that it kept us hungry Blackledges from eating it!).

8. Mother is holding a book titled "Recognizing Fire Hydrants". Another classic legend: Mother was notoriously near-sighted, but generally refused to wear glasses (was it Blackledge pride?).

One day, Dad was driving Mother home during chilly weather. As their car approached our Gramercy Street home, Mother turned to Dad with some alarm in her voice, pointing at the fire hydrant which was located at the intersection of Gramercy Street and Holcomb, and worriedly said to Dad, "What's Peter doing running around without his coat on?".

9. As noted in Background, Mother was not an enthusiastic homemaker. However, she loved a challenge and was very good at succeeding at them. At one point, she decided to learn how to cook. So she bought the "Fanny Farmer Cookbook." She started on Page 1 of that cookbook, and went from front to back. However, Mother also worked in projects (e.g., I was her last

"Have Children Project"). As Dad would often laughingly tell the story, after each Fanny Farmer Cookbook dish which Mother would serve, Dad would say to her "Missy, that was delicious. When can we have that again?" To which Mother would reply "Never!!! We have finished that dish, and we are moving on." When she reached the end of that Fanny Farmer Cookbook, she (now feeling that she had mastered cooking) closed the book and never again prepared another of its delicacies for us. That ushered in the family's long "Bataan Death March" of dishes which required as little investment of her time and attention as possible ----- resulting in many less edible dishes. After one such experience, Penn complained to Mother "This food is burnt!!!!". To which Mother sweetly but steelily replied "No, darling, it's just crisp." Hence the book in Mother's lap entitled "Crisp Cooking."

10. After mastering and moving on from cooking, Mother decided to move on from housekeeping in general. She convinced Dad to hire a maid to do those tasks. This ushered in a series of extraordinary experiences for me and those siblings who had not yet left for Rice or Naval Academy. Our first maid "Bertha", because of her long service in our house, became somewhat like a member of our family. There is even a family picture of Bertha helping Mother put on her college graduation cap and gown. Such inclusion of Bertha in family events caused Mother, who had always referred to all us children as "Bunnies", to at one point refer to her as "Bertha Bunny" ----- prompting a shocked and exasperated Penn to yell "Bertha can't be a bunny. We're the bunnies!!!!" Mom quickly replied "Okay, then; she's Bertha Bug." Hence, the character on the right side of the artwork, wearing a Bug, costume, is our long-time house maid Bertha who is steaming mad because she has been demoted from "Bunny" to "Bug". But Bertha's long and storied tenure in our home came to an abrupt end at what I called "Shoot-Out At The Blackledge Kitchen." Bertha had told Mother that she wanted to take off on June-Teenth Day, to celebrate the day when Texas slaves were freed. Mother said no. Neither woman would budge. An extraordinary loud exchange of words ensued, which concluded with Bertha grabbing her belongings (Mother would not let her take the paper bag of Blackledge left-overs which she usually took home), storming out of our house, and never returning. The result was a series of replacement maids. To me, the two most colorful were "Glass Eye" (my name for her, because she had a habit of taking out her glass eye during the day because it bothered her, and I would round a corner of our house to find said eye staring up at me from a dish or tabletop), and "Crazy Annie". "Crazy Annie", while washing dishes at the sink, would carry on conversations with "The Cat Man" (apparently a close relation of Satan), whom she would explain to me had materialized on the drainboard to thrash his tail and hurl insults at her. The most amazing exploit of Crazy Annie was when she was arrested for loading her revolver on a Houston public bus. Dad received a call from the Houston jail where CA had been incarcerated, with CA pleading "Cap, you gotta come bail me out" which Dad kindly did.

11. At the top of the artwork is a sparrow, furiously flying. Our family would at times play pantomime games on the porch. One such time, Mother came down from her bedroom cloister to participate. We picked two-person teams, which resulted in Dad obligingly picking Mother as his partner. Mother was giving clues for her word to Dad. Mother was extraordinarily animated, running back and forth, left to right, seeming to be flapping her wings. Dad guessed every conceivable word, but couldn't get the correct word. Finally, with time up, Dad said "Missy, I'm so sorry, but I can't guess the word that you were trying to act out. What is the word?" Mother, very exasperated that Dad had not guessed what she felt was the obvious word from her descriptive actions, pointedly said to Dad "Allan, the word is "Blizzard"!!!! How could you not get that?!!!!". To which Dad, now incredulous, replied "But Missy, how do I get "Blizzard" from what you were acting out?" To which Mother firmly stated "I was being a sparrow!!! Can't you just imagine a little sparrow flying through a blizzard?" ----- Say Goodnight Gracie -----